

Acts 3:12–19

Ps. 4

1 John 3:1–7

Luke 24:36b–48

Living as Children of God

Goal for the Session

Through exploring 1 John’s affirmation that we are now children of God, adults will consider what that identity means in their lives.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on 1 John 3:1–7

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Bartlett

One of the main themes in our passage is the assurance of the present and the promise of the future: verses 1–4. In the Gospel of John, which is the source book for this epistle’s theology, eternal life is understood both as the promise of life with God beyond death and as genuine, fruitful, Spirit-guided life in the present (see the dual assurances of John 11:25–26). Our passage also claims that the relationship between believers and God has both a present and a future, eschatological dimension. In the present believers have the assurance that they are God’s children.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Ronald Cole-Turner

The source of our oddness is the love of God that makes us into God’s children. Knowing that we are loved by such a love, confessing it and consenting to it, we agree to be made different, to let ourselves enter a process of transformation that uproots us from our natural identity and reconfigures the fundamental definitions of our lives. Our birth certificate states our natural identity. Our baptism certificate declares our true identity. By God’s love, we are no longer strangers, orphans lost in the cosmos, without hope or direction except for our own imagination and self-rescue. We are loved, claimed, and redefined as nothing less than God’s children.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Claudia Highbaugh

The most difficult part of this passage is working to open minds to a central kind of relationship that does not define itself by difference. In this text, cooperation is the goal; difference in name and culture and place is a distraction to the goal of right relationship. Children of God attend to right relationships. In the early church, people formed tight communities based on their faith in Jesus. Our job is to work at this sense of relationship one to another, and sometimes that makes us go back to start over.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” William L. Self

The opening chapters of this letter make it clear that Christians do sin. We not only need to have a clear understanding of God’s grace and an experience with that grace through Jesus; we also need to know the power and destructive nature of sin. No compromise can be made with evil. This text makes it clear, and our churches should take note. The journey to the center of the faith proclaims without compromise John’s way of making believers stronger and protecting them against the destructive message of those who would lead them astray. We would do well to learn from him.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

1 John 3:1–7

Focus on Your Teaching

In any given group, there will be adults who have had a range of childhood experiences. Some will look back on their childhoods as a time when they were loved and cherished by parents, when there was endless time for play. For others, it may have been a time marked by loneliness, neglect, or abuse. Everyone brings assumptions about childhood shaped by what they themselves experienced. To know you are loved and claimed by God as God's own child might be welcome news to all, but for very different reasons. To help adults explore and claim this new identity even as they acknowledge different childhood memories is the challenge.

Thank you, God, that you claimed me as your own child. As I lead others who are also your children, guide my words and actions. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Christ candle
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 25, 2021
- paper
- pens

For Responding

- option 1: newsprint, marker, Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: writing paper, pens
- option 3: drawing paper, colored markers or crayons

Eschatological: of or relating to the end of the world or events related to it.

Epistle: any one of the letters to the early Christians that are part of the New Testament.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place a Christ candle on a table.

Greet participants with the traditional Easter greeting, “Christ is risen,” and encourage the response, “Christ is risen indeed.” Distribute paper and pens and ask adults to write as many single words or short phrases as they can imagine that describe how they identify themselves, such as daughter or artist. In the large group, invite volunteers to call out some of their descriptive terms. Ask:

✠ How does the way we identify ourselves shape how we think, feel, or act?

Say that in today's session, participants will consider what it means to identify oneself as a child of God.

Light the candle, identifying it as a reminder of the presence of the living Christ. Remind participants that this is the third Sunday of Eastertide. Read Psalm 4:6b–8. Sit in silence, then pray the following:

Thank you, O God, for the safety of your love. Shine your light on us as we seek the enlightenment of your Word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Inform participants that the First Epistle of John was likely written sometime after the Gospel of John for a community that knew and loved that Gospel, although its style suggests the author is not the same as the author of John's Gospel. The author sees his readers as both learners in need of instruction and “little children” to guide and correct.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 John 3:1–7. Invite general reactions. Some may mention their dislike of the use of “Father” for God. Acknowledge that, of course, no one name can encompass

the full meaning of the infinite God; however, in the context in which this letter was written, calling God “Father” was radical. It was to recognize God as deeply personal and caring.

Say that while today's focus scripture extends through verse 7, the session deals with the ideas in the first three verses. A discussion of sin and righteousness is best left to another time when a more in-depth exploration is possible.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on 1 John 3:1–7) and ask adults to silently read the “What?” excerpt. Invite the group to read aloud John 3:16. Say that while this Bible verse focuses on the eternal life to come, today's passage pairs the expectation of life eternal with one about the kind of life we are to lead on earth. Discuss:

✧ How would you describe “a genuine, fruitful, Spirit-guided life?”

Ask the group to read the “Where?” excerpt silently. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Those Odd Christians). Invite adults to look up the Scripture passages and identify characteristics that define who we are as children of God. After a few minutes, ask volunteers to name characteristics. Ask:

✧ Why does the writer of the “Where?” excerpt say that we are odd?

✧ In what ways do Christian values set us against the values of a society that prizes individualism?

Ask someone to read aloud the “So What?” excerpt. Discuss:

✧ What is unique about being in a relationship that does not define itself by difference in name or culture or place? How do you define right relationship?

✧ How does seeing ourselves as children of God enhance our understanding of right relationship?

To transition to Responding, note that the “So What?” excerpt asserts that people in the early church formed tight communities based on their faith. Discuss ways your faith community promotes tight relations among members.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. Consider Identity in Action By considering the implications of their identities as children of God, adults can identify ways to better apply those characteristics to their daily lives. Invite the group to place Resource Sheet 2 next to the piece of paper they created in Gathering with their various identities. Challenge them to think about how they embody those qualities on Resource Sheet 2 through their identities. For example, how does a mother relate to family members in ways that reveal Christian qualities?

After a few minutes, allow a few volunteers to each give one example.

Invite participants to consider the identities where competition, individualism, and perhaps even ruthlessness may be valued, such as the workplace. Ask:

**EASY
PREP**

- ✧ How do you reconcile these values with the qualities you are called to embody as children of God?

Encourage participants to identify one or two marks of living as a child of God they would like to better exemplify. Ask that they choose a spiritual practice on which to focus in order to enhance spiritual growth.

- 2. Create a Baptismal Certificate** By creating a baptismal certificate that declares our true identity as children of God, adults can commit to practices that enhance a Spirit-filled life. Ask adults to review the “So What?” excerpt. Invite them to name what is on a baptismal certificate—typically, the name of the person and the date baptized, who baptized the person, where he or she was baptized, who was present, and sometimes a Scripture verse or an excerpt from the baptismal service. Form pairs or small groups and distribute paper and pens and have them create certificates. Ask:

- ✧ What are some spiritual practices the baptized person uses to enhance transformation into a fruitful, Spirit-filled life?

Make a list of suggested practices. Encourage adults to commit to at least one suggested transformational practice.

- 3. Create Word Clouds of Spirit-Guided Life** By exploring right relationship in the faith community and creating word clouds, adults can identify ways to be children of God together, guided by the Spirit. Ask a volunteer to read the “So What?” excerpt aloud again. Ask participants to name differences that exist in your congregation, from obvious ones like differences in gender and family structure to less overt ones like ranges of income or educational background. List all identified differences. Then make a list of practices that might be part of a fruitful, Spirit-led life. Distribute large sheets of paper and markers or crayons. Form small groups and have them create word clouds (word montages) showing how the differences and the practices might interact. Post the word clouds where congregants can read them.

Wordle is an online tool for generating word clouds. The more frequently words appear, the greater their prominence in the Wordle. Go to www.wordle.net/ and paste in text from the activity to see what Wordle creates.

CLOSING

Ask adults to complete this sentence with ways they show they are children of God: “As a child of God, I . . . As children of God, we . . .”

To close, pray the following:

God of love, we give thanks for your surpassing love that calls us to a new identity as children of God. Open us to your Spirit, that we may be guided to live ever more fruitful lives together. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 25, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on 1 John 3:1–7

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Those Odd Christians

When God calls us to be children of God, we enter a process of transformation marking us as God's own. In contrast with what our culture values, we define our lives in unique and distinctly odd ways. In each Scripture below, write what the passage identifies as a mark of being a child of God.

1. Matthew 5:38–42

2. Matthew 5:43–44

3. Matthew 7:1–7

4. Matthew 16:24–26

5. Matthew 18:21–22

6. Mark 9:33–37

7. Mark 10:42–45

8. Luke 6:29–31

What are other marks of being a child of God that you can name from Scripture?

